

Public engagement requires little more than embracing that of which most academics are afraid – looking like an idiot

by Blog Admin

April 30, 2012

Fluffed lines, muddled dates and forgotten names, it is surprising what academics will do and say when given 60 seconds to discuss their specialization. Yet, breaking a subject down to what is truly important is a great way to encourage public engagement and create impact, writes [Steven Fielding](#).



The [School of Politics and International Relations](#) at the University of Nottingham is, we like to think, at the forefront of using the new social media to engage with those outside of higher education. Our [School blog](#) – which built on the success of the award-winning 2010 [general election blog](#) – aims to make the research of staff and students more relevant to journalists, practitioners and those generally interested in politics. Individually and as a School we also use [Twitter](#) to comment on political events. And – of course – we have a [Facebook page](#).

Our use of the new social media is informed by the august principle of suck-it-and-see. Just like everybody else working in this area we are learning as we go. This has meant colleagues doing new things or, more accurately, doing old things in new ways – for most academics already have the skills to enable them to thrive in the social media, if only they knew it.

Error loading player:
No playable sources found

Perhaps politics researchers have a greater duty to use the new social media than other groups of academics. For, as the 2012 Hansard Audit of Political Engagement confirms, we are living at a time when politics inspires less and less interest. So if we don't transcend our usual, time-bound activities there's a danger we'll end up talking to ourselves – more than we do already.

Politics in Sixty Seconds is one of our more popular initiatives and is aimed at the very group for whom politics seems most alienating. Paul Heywood came up with the initial idea in 2010 while Head of School. As he recalls, 'I was looking for a way to prove to my daughter, who was studying GCSE Politics at the time, that academics could make what looked like dry topics accessible to those of her age'. Nottingham's School of Chemistry had already made short videos about every element in the Periodic Table, and Paul thought Politics might emulate that example in some way.

We were fortunate that Andrew Burden, a former journalist, was a member of the University's Communications and Marketing team. He already knew about the School having interviewed some of us for various podcasts and he'd given us invaluable help in setting up and running the election blog.

But he admitted short videos for politics was a challenge, tactfully suggesting, "Selling a School of Chemistry to a young audience is helped by the fact they can make things explode and flare up in test tubes. Making a School of Politics accessible was something else".

In the sad absence of exploding props, Andrew helped Paul develop the format, which in the end owed more than something to Radio 4's Just a Minute: get an expert to sum up a political idea or concept in less than 60 seconds.

Easier said than done, of course. Academics normally expect years to expound their ideas in written form and are accustomed to having 60 minute lectures to verbally communicate their ideas – which the best of us sometimes find an impossibly short amount of time. So imagine the panic when faced with the prospect

of 60 seconds. Even those of us accustomed to talking to the likes of Adam Boulton, Jeremy Paxman and John Humphrys felt under pressure.

In anticipation of mass panic, Lucy Sargisson and Sara Motta were prevailed upon to be the guinea pigs and do a couple of pilots to show to staff. If this reassured some, not everybody was convinced – but we now have nearly 50 videos on Youtube and iTunesU that cover the full range of our expertise.

Speaking for myself, I was amazed by how daunting the prospect of staring into the cold eye of a camera can be, knowing you have less than 60 seconds to put across, in my case, concepts like social democracy and political parties. I sometimes cheated by having notes directly under the camera but others went commando. Andrew ensured that the experience was as relaxed and enjoyable as possible.

Having nailed a subject, there was also a strong sense of achievement, and I think those that did a video surprised themselves – it's surprising what you can say in 60 seconds and the discipline forces you assess what is truly important about a subject.

But however it was done, with perhaps just one notable exception, everybody needed multiple takes: we fluffed lines, forgot names, muddled dates or just ran out of time. And it is here that Andrew supplied the final touch of genius. Not only he did he ensure the videos were snappily edited, with a trailer that grabs the attention right away, but he included our cock-ups at the end of each effort. As Andrew says: 'The bloopers were an important part of the appeal, as they tended to make people watch the whole video to see them at the end (although as the academics did more, they became more adept at delivering and bloopers became harder to come by)'.

This meant we embraced that of which most academics are afraid – looking like an idiot.

So far as we can tell, the reaction has been very positive and the videos have been used in schools and colleges to provoke debate. In fact, some of the later videos tackled subjects specifically requested by those studying for their GCSEs.

Sadly Andrew has moved on to [Inkspot Media Video Production](#). While Politics in Sixty Seconds is currently paused we are hoping to take the series on and – if not to create a Politics Periodic Table – present among other things our Top Ten Political Theorists. Hegel in a minute anyone?

Related posts:

1. [Something old, something new: opening a new path to public engagement with the most traditional of academic tools](#)
2. [Five minutes with Elaine Byrne: “Legislative change requires public mindsets to change, evidence based research and a willingness by policy makers to countenance reform”](#)
3. [Support, engagement, visibility and personalised news: Twitter has a lot to offer academics if we look past its image problem](#)
4. [Don't swap the “Ivory Tower” for a cyber one: public engagement and the internet](#)
5. [Digital scholarship allows the media to magnify the power and reach of academic research but the partnership between academics and journalists must be developed](#)